

Investing in the right to food

Pierre Spitz

*Director of the Office of Evaluation and Studies,
International Fund for Agricultural Development*



When food scarcities and famines struck throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America in the early 1970s, the right to food suddenly received more attention than it had in previous decades. The World Food Conference, which convened in 1974 to analyse the causes of these food crises and identify remedies, adopted a Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition, which was endorsed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in the same year. This declaration, proclaiming "the right to be free from hunger and malnutrition", did not include legal instruments, but the Conference itself proposed the establishment of a United Nations financial institution exclusively devoted to improving the livelihood of the rural poor, the first victims of famines. Delegates understood that, during the famines in Africa, Asia and Latin America, hundreds of thousands of rural men and women - the very people who sowed the seeds, harvested the crops and minded the herds - had perished for lack of food while, during the same period and in

the same countries, starvation in the cities (which are the seats of power) had been relieved by government interventions on the food front. Country dwellers are spatially dispersed and not threatening to the authorities unless they head towards the towns, particularly the capital. They are also socially and economically divided during a famine; the rural rich tending to take advantage of the rural poor by depriving them of their meagre assets.



A farmer works in a rice field irrigated by an IFAD project in China

IFAD is exclusively devoted to improving the livelihood of the rural poor.

The new financial institution established by the Conference was the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). In catering exclusively to the needs of the rural poor, IFAD was very innovative in the development context of the 1970s which was still dominated by the "trickle down" paradigm. This paradigm held that: generalized economic growth would lead to development for all; agricultural production increases at the national level would eliminate famines; and the most efficient way to increase food production was to concentrate investments on the better-endowed regions and farmers.

In this context, and with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that IFAD was conceived as an investment instrument to further the realization of the right to food of the rural poor both directly, in its geographical areas of intervention, and indirectly, through inspiring the use of its own innovative approach in other areas and by other organizations. Since IFAD started operating in 1978, not only have the rural poor and their rights to food and an adequate livelihood been a focus of attention, but so has the recognition of their human dignity; and this is in the original spirit of the United Nations' founding fathers, who envisaged a world in which economic and social rights would be reconciled with political rights.

Recognition of human dignity means, for example, that international organizations need to respect and build on traditional knowledge and practices in producing food rather than imposing alien production methods and models. Such an approach requires humility and interest in others; the most deprived are regarded not only as fellow human beings but also as experts in their own environment and lives. Once this concept is recognized, development can no longer be approached as a



Farmers in the Niger beat rice stalks to separate grains

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series of projects designed by outside experts, but requires the cross-fertilization of ideas and resources and the mutual respect that contribute to reducing hunger and fostering human dignity. As a fund giving loans to governments for fighting hunger and poverty, IFAD has to apply economic and financial analysis in order to develop cost-effective sustainable and replicable projects, but people must always come first.

In 20 years of investment in the rural poor's rights to food and a decent livelihood, IFAD has reduced food insecurity through nearly 500 projects in more than 100 countries, lending governments a total of US\$5.6 billion. Most of these loans are repaid with a very small percentage of arrears and defaults. Not all of the projects have reached their objectives; many diverse factors come into play in the complex web of rural development and some of these cannot easily be foreseen at the time of project design. However, the successful projects bear witness to the possibility of reconciling a human approach with the economic efficiency of investment; an important and comforting finding in a world in which human values tend to be replaced by market values.

IFAD's Office of Evaluation and Studies has selected a few representative success stories for presentation to the general public in a brochure called *Partners in Success* (Rome, IFAD, 1998). In this brochure, those involved in the projects' design, implementation and evaluation, particularly those who participated in the field, speak out and express their views. For instance, A. Amadu, a small farmer in Ghana, who was elected president of one of the water users' associations that were formed around irrigation dams built with IFAD support, states: "Before, when crops failed, my family did not have enough to live on during the rest of the year and we experienced famine. [With the dam] despite the drought in 1996, I was able to feed my family throughout the year and I am proud to be President of the Binduri Water Users' Association." P. Sembayee from India reflects this sense of pride. She became a member of a credit and savings group within the framework of the IFAD-financed Tamil Nadu Women's Development Project: "Thanks to the project, I have learned many things: how to read and write, to go

to the bank and to go to the collector's office. I am now ready to face all the other problems in my life. I stand on my own feet."

During an evaluation of the IFAD-financed Production Credit for Rural Women project in Nepal, a very poor farmer in Mustang district said: "Before the project we felt our hunger and poverty were for ever and nothing could be done about them. We do not fear to starve any more during the winter months. We now have hope and, as a woman, I have acquired *izzat* [dignity]."

This statement not only confirms that "necessitous women are not free women", but demonstrates how civil and political rights should not be divorced from social and economic ones. Investing in the right to food through the promotion of groups and associations, with the participation of the most deprived - women and men - in decision-making, so that they can voice their demands and exercise their freedom of speech, is investing also in human dignity.

The views expressed in this contribution are personal and do not necessarily represent the views of IFAD.